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Simple Solution for a Complex Problem

by Rebecca Eineke

(English 1102)

The Assignment: The students were asked to write a research and documented proposal for a solution to a problem.

My Zippo lighter said “I smoke. F*#\$ing deal with it”. Flicking it open and shut became almost as addictive as lighting up, but nothing could compare to the dizzying puffs of my first few cigarettes. I was only sixteen, but certain negative, life changing events had occurred, leaving me thirsty for the chaos that led me to desire rebellion. Infused with the excitement of first time rebellious acts, I ignored my best friend’s plea against my first cigarette. She ended up following suit after I bombarded her with a gleeful description of a light headed light up and the possibility of a new, sophisticated smoker persona. Sitting on the concrete steps outside with her while smoking our first packs of Marlboro Lights felt like a carefree reward from our late night summer rebellion. We were hooked.

Smoking, however, lost its excitement as the rebellious act of a tough girl, and it became an addiction that I, sometimes barely but always desperately, managed to support. I became a chain-smoker, which is a person who smokes a cigarette right after putting one out or sometimes even lights the next one with the butt of the one he or she just finished. During rough times, I could get up to smoking three packs of Marlboro Reds, which is Marlboro’s strongest cigarette, a day. Sometimes, if I forgot I already had a cigarette going in the ashtray, I’d light another one. I loved smoking, and I felt it loved me back. Completely immersed in my smoking identity, my laughs soon turned to coughs as my dependence on nicotine became more evident. At one point or another, every smoker says to themselves that they need to quit. A smoker can only ignore the risks until they can actually feel the effects; however, by that time most are so addicted to nicotine that the daunting task of quitting can drive a person further into addiction. Still, I tried to quit. I tried the gum, the patch, a spray, hypnosis, pills, and cold turkey, but even with the full support of my boyfriend, who had managed to quit cold turkey, all my attempts failed miserably. Only now, after three years of heavy smoking, countless failed attempts to quit, and with the support of my fathers promise for tuition money as a bribe, have I been able to reach my fifty-first day as a non-smoker. This was my personal experience with tobacco and the addictive nature of nicotine in a nutshell. It is this experience that has led me to the following opinions.

Tobacco’s legality and presence in American society today poses several problems. Efforts by anti-smoking advocates to chip away at these problems have been valiant, but they have still left tobacco legal in our nation, causing harm to all citizens. A bold and permanent solution needs to be implemented through the proposal of my solution to the problems arising from the tobacco industry. Tobacco needs to be completely eradicated from our society. Most certainly there are complications, obstacles of sort, standing in the way of such drastic actions, but it will soon be apparent that they are necessary to overcome for the good of everyone in the United States of America.

There is no doubt that conflicts and controversies have risen surrounding the tobacco industry in America. This debated topic, however, hasn’t been heatedly present forever. It wasn’t until fifty years or so ago that questions about the tobacco industry uncovered the truth and launched a war. Still, fifty years is too long a time for the allowance of such a poison to be sold to Americans. Tobacco poses several problems to our society, such as teenage addiction and damaging second hand smoke, but the bottom line of every debatable aspect of tobacco is that it is killing people. The

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in 2004 that “[t]obacco is the nation’s largest killer, causing nearly 20 percent of all deaths in the United States each year-nearly 20 times the deaths caused by motor vehicles” (Cooper, “Tobacco Industry”). The statistical data can be staggering, but the range of this problem is perhaps bigger than one might think. According to Steven F. Goldstone, chairman and chief executive officer of R.J. Reynolds Nabisco, Inc., fifty million people in America use tobacco products. Even though smokers may be in a minority in our society, their sheer size and effect on others creates undeniably serious issues. The already long list of diseases killing both smokers and non-smokers is continually growing. The Surgeon General, Richard H. Carmona, said at a news conference in May of 2004 that “[t]he toxins from cigarette smoke go everywhere the blood flows” (“Surgeon General on the Dangers of Smoking”). Needless to say, the list of diseases caused by smoking is now much more than a few pages long. Ongoing research is leading to more and more proof of its harmful nature and diseases that are killing us.

If people could simply quit smoking any time, perhaps tobacco wouldn’t be such a serious problem in America, but the nicotine in tobacco is addictive, trapping people fated for death. Former Surgeon General David A. Kessler noted to the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment in March of 1994 that “[t]wo-thirds of adults who smoke say they wish they could quit”; therefore, “seventeen million try to quit each year, but fewer than one out of ten succeed. For every smoker who quits, nine try and fail” (“Testimony on the Addictive Nature of Tobacco”). Plain and simple, nicotine is an addictive drug that is killing people. Certainly the problems posed by tobacco are very serious, and action needs to be taken to get rid of these problems.

Actions have been pursued by anti-smoking activists, but they have not fought the war against tobacco on the right battlefield. Truth ads on television aim to attack the tobacco industry and discourage smokers by simply informing the public of the often startling facts. While I was still smoking, however, the ads left me rather unaffected. By the time I was addicted to cigarettes, no amount of information discouraged my habit. I mockingly chuckled at the commercials and wondered what they hoped to accomplish by airing them. Truth ads cost millions of dollars just as the tobacco industry ads do. They are campaigning for your vote, but the tobacco industry is an unfit candidate. A drug that is killing its own party members should not be in the running to begin with! Campaigning against an illegitimate party is a gross waste of money. Each side will advertise and sway people’s opinions, but the polls need to be closed.

Chicago’s ban on smoking in public areas took the right step against the tobacco industry; however, such a ban is not a comprehensive enough solution and only inconveniences smokers. Opened shortly after the ban passed was the Marshall McGearty Tobacco Lounge which is intended to be an “upscale” smoking lounge that is exempt from the ban because its revenues come mainly from tobacco sales as a tobacco vendor (Davey). This type of lounge only exemplifies the loose grip of the ban’s constraint. I was still smoking when the ban first took effect. I felt it might become an intrusion on my rights, but when they took the ashtrays away from the outside of the building where I work, which is not located in Chicago, my co-workers and I only laughed at it. We flicked our butts into the dirt and rhetorically inquired if they liked that better. Chicago made a bold move by ostracizing smokers in the city. In doing so, a lot of feathers have been ruffled, but the bird needs to be plucked.

A current effort to push for Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulation over tobacco is only an extra, unnecessary step towards eradicating tobacco from our country. Many people fear that allowing the FDA to have regulatory power over tobacco will lead to prohibition. I can only hope it would lead to that; however, this step is already proving to be needlessly time consuming. We need to skip it and go for the ultimate goal.

Measures are being taken, hurtful blows delivered, the research has been done, and books have been written, but now, serious action needs to be taken. We need to go for the jugular. I am proposing that tobacco be made illegal in the United States just as many other drugs have been. This

would be the final blow; reducing smokers, who don't quit in pursuit of a healthier lifestyle for them and the people around them, to the level of criminals. This action is needed to reduce the presence of this drug in America to next to nothing. There are, however, numerous complications to this bold solution, and perhaps if there were not, this solution could have been implemented a long time ago.

As with any drastic proposal, there are bound to be complications that need to be considered, and certainly passing a law to make tobacco illegal to produce, sell, or possess in the United States poses multiple obstacles. One of those obstacles is that, as with any drug, people will be able to obtain tobacco illegally. This might create a new market for drug dealers to exploit, and at first, the demand in this market may be extremely high. Tobacco Industry Representatives have been noted saying that "...someone is going to rush to fill that vacuum with smuggled cigarettes" (Cooper, "Regulating Tobacco"). The possibility, however, of such a demand, from rogue smokers who refuse to accept the law, only exemplifies the necessity of the law itself. Benowitz, who co-authored a proposal to reduce nicotine levels, supports this by saying that "[a] black market makes this product sound a lot like alcohol or heroine" ("Cooper, Regulating Tobacco"). The fact that a black market demand would be created from making tobacco illegal signals brightly that nicotine is in fact a drug that needs to be removed from our society. Certainly, though, this complication needs to be taken into account, but if tobacco were to be treated as any other illegal substance, eventually this problem would diminish as the availability of tobacco dwindles and the hassle of obtaining it becomes too difficult. This complication is potentially very serious, but would ultimately be adequately handled by the experienced police force.

A much more serious consequence of making tobacco illegal in the United States comes from the shutting down of tobacco producers and sellers. Major tobacco companies and even small cigar stores would be shut down and cost countless jobs. Also for gas stations and convenience stores it would cost them a chunk of their business, possibly putting struggling small businesses out of business. This complication has the potential of becoming very serious, and I believe has been, along with the power of cigarette companies to influence America politically, one of the reasons that my proposal has not already been carried out. As for the major cigarette companies, I will only attempt to reconcile the situation by saying that part of our economy should never have been built upon a market of self-destructive habitual formation that is a disease to every other branch of our economy in both a literal and non-literal sense. The misdeeds and immoral actions of cigarette companies have recently been brought to light. Former Surgeon General David A. "Kessler presented lawmakers with documents that he says prove that cigarette manufacturers have long known of tobacco's addictive qualities and manipulated nicotine levels to keep smokers hooked" (Cooper, "Regulating Tobacco"). Thus, I feel no pity for these companies.

Tobacco doesn't only affect the major manufacturing companies. It affects every other business in America from small business owners to corporate employers of smokers. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona states that tobacco use is "...costing the country \$157 billion annually in direct medical care and lost productivity" ("Surgeon General on the Dangers of Smoking"). This is a massive amount of money being drained from our economy. To give you some perspective, it's estimated that each pack of cigarettes causes more than \$3.90 in lost productivity and medical costs ("Surgeon General on the Dangers of Smoking"). This is nearly the entire price of the pack! After my solution is carried out, however, American businesses will have less medical bills to pay for on behalf of their employees. My proposed solution will immediately hurt but ultimately help the American economy.

The last major conflict that I will address with putting my proposed solution into action has to do with individual choice and constitutional rights. This is, perhaps, the biggest obstacle in the way of making a law to make tobacco illegal. Why, one might ask, shouldn't an adult be able to make the decision for him or herself whether or not to smoke? The age one is legally permitted to purchase tobacco and the idea that it is a personal choice when it does effect others are issues I can

hotly debate, but in sticking with my ultimate proposal and solution, I believe that Americans do not have the power of choice that they claim in this situation. Once an initial decision has been made, one's ability to choose to quit is all but lost. Nicotine, the addictive drug in tobacco products, has been proven to be at least as addictive to humans as cocaine and heroine (Fisher 13). Cocaine and heroine are drugs that aren't fooled around with in America, but nicotine, a drug that is at least equivalent in addictive power, is sold to millions of people every day. I came across a quote from a book I am reading called *Learning to Smoke*. This quote echoes my opinion with shocking similarity. Jordan Goodman, author of *Tobacco History: The Cultures of Dependence* states that "...once you have become addicted to nicotine, your subsequent smoking cannot be taken as your consent to the risks" (qtd. in Hughes 4). Furthermore, imagine my surprise upon discovering that Kessler also said that "[i]t is fair to argue that the decision to start smoking may be a matter of choice. But once they have started smoking regularly, most smokers are in effect deprived of the choice to stop smoking" ("Testimony on the Addictive Nature of Tobacco"). It is clear to me that freedom of choice is already out of the question for tobacco users.

Fueling concerns of prohibition, tobacco manufacturing companies have argued that such things as fatty foods or alcohol risk being controlled by the government if tobacco can be regulated ("The Government Should Increase Efforts to Reduce Smoking"). This is only a tool to instigate fear of government control. These fears are completely inaccurate and induce ignorant accusations at that. These fears seem to bring about legitimate concerns, but clarification on this issue comes from knowing that "[t]he fact is that fat, and other potentially harmful substances such as alcohol, are only dangerous when taken in excess. Tobacco is the only product that is harmful when used as intended" ("The Government Should Increase Efforts to Reduce Smoking"). This is a matter of eradicating a dangerous drug, not the regulation of junk food. The complication of personal rights to be able to decide for one's self about the use of tobacco and protests of prohibition are invalid in the case of tobacco because it is a drug. Free will is stripped of tobacco users due to the addictive nature of tobacco. I was appalled to learn that "[a]fter surgery for lung cancer, almost half of smokers resume smoking", and that "[a]mong smokers who suffer a heart attack, 38 percent resume smoking while they are still in the hospital" ("Testimony on the Addictive Nature of Tobacco"). These actions are not made by people exercising their rights. They are prisoners, and my solution is the key that will open their jail cells.

So what, you may ask, is my solution? On the most basic and important level, a law needs to be passed to outlaw tobacco in any form. It needs to be made illegal to produce, sell, or possess. This law needs to be announced to the public followed by an explanation of the grace period, which would allow tobacco users time to quit and business owners time to find an alternative market. Also, the creation of more readily available support programs to help tobacco users quit will need to be implemented. The source of funding for these support groups will come from the immense amounts of money, hundreds of millions of dollars annually, wasted on anti-smoking campaigns and marketing (Neff). This solution is a necessity. "Tobacco use, particularly smoking, remains the numbers one cause of preventable disease and death in the United States" ("The Government Should Increase Efforts to Reduce Smoking"). This solution will drastically aid the prevention of many diseases caused by tobacco. There are many extravagant excuses and seemingly daunting complications that allow this drug to be legal and free to kill U.S. citizens, but the solution itself is really very simple. This is a necessary step for America to take. It is a major leap that will lead to a plethora of beneficial outcomes.

America will have a bright future after this solution to the major problems caused by tobacco is implemented. Carmona encourages that "[b]y quitting today a smoker can assure a healthier tomorrow" ("Surgeon General on the Dangers of Smoking"). People in America don't have to keep dying. As a result of this solution, everyone in our society will live happier, longer lives. We can be a light to the rest of the world by leading as an example. It only takes some logic, courage, and

conviction to make this solution a reality. A healthier America is possible in the near future, and I am willing to fight for it! Are you?

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